

THE

MORAL OBLIGATION

TO THE

Positive Appointments

IN

RELIGION.

With Regard, chiefly, to the

SACRAMENTS.

L O N D O N:

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T H E
M O R A L O B L I G A T I O N
T O T H E
Positive Appointments
I N
R E L I G I O N.



THE diminutive things that have been said by some, of the positive appointments in religion, and the extravagant things advanced by others, are two extremes, which true reasoning leads no body into, on either hand. It is as contrary to the nature of things to make nothing of them, as to make them the whole of religion. To know exactly the

regard that is due to them, is to find out the rank, and order, they are placed in by him who has appointed them. This is our present inquiry. In which we are the more likely to succeed, the more sincerely we avoid being influenced by any thing but by virtue and truth. I shall lay together what I have to say on this subject, under the following propositions.

PROP. I. Some things are *absolutely* necessary to salvation, and in their own nature.

WE call those things *absolutely* necessary, without which there can be no salvation at all. Thus, a mind suited to the happiness intended by the word *salvation*, is *absolutely* necessary ; or holiness, *without which no man shall see the Lord*. Thus, purity of heart, is necessary to see God ; *blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God*. Thus a renewed nature is necessary to our entering the kingdom of God ; for, *except a man be born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*.

THESE things are necessary, not only as a *conditio sine qua non*, without which you have no *title* ; but as a fitness, for happiness, without which you have no *capacity* of it. All the titles in the world to heaven, can

can never give the pleasure of heaven, without a suitableness to its enjoyments.

FITNESS, here, is as the eye to the delights of colours, and prospects; the ear to the pleasures of harmony; and as the palate to those of taste and relish; that is, a capacity of enjoyment. As there must be an animal nature for animal pleasures, a rational nature for the rational ones, so there must be the divine and heavenly nature for those that are divine and heavenly. No man would care to live even with a God whom he did not love.

PROP. II. No *meerly positive* appointments are necessary in this sense, (*i. e.*) absolutely, and in their own nature. To make salvation depend upon what I may be happy without, is not reconcilable to the wisdom, or goodness of God. If there never had been a sacrament in the world, I might have been happy without it; you can't say so of love to God, and likeness to him. — I may be cast at too great a distance; I may be confin'd; I may be sick; or under some natural incapacity: besides, there may be combinations of men, whose number and power may clog the plain appointment, so, as that I shall not be allowed the *institution*,

tion, without the *superstition*; nor the children's bread, without the poison they have mixed with it. In all these, and the like cases, I am as sure that the external rite is not necessary, as I am that God is wise and good; and as I am that the *thief* upon the cross was saved without the Lord's supper; or that *Simon Magus* was in the gall of bitterness and bond of iniquity, notwithstanding his baptism by the apostle *Peter* himself.

IN the same way of reasoning I infer, that God never suspends our salvation upon things not at all within the power he has given us. For instance, the salvation of an infant does not depend upon its being baptised; which if it be not done, is not the child's fault; and if it be done, is none of the child's virtue. It is said by our Lord, *John* iii. 5. *Except a man be born of water, and of the spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.* Asserting the necessity of being renewed by that holy spirit, whose cleansing operations are often compared to water; as the quickning and

It seems *St. Peter*, had not the *secret* of making the meer *opus operatum* valid; which they who call themselves his successors, nevertheless, derive from him.

warm-

warming influences of the same spirit are elsewhere compared to fire. If baptism be at all concerned here, then the meaning is no more than this; that the thing signified by baptism, *viz.* the spirit's purifying influence, must go along with the external rite, in order to the kingdom of God. Not the necessity of the outward rite, but the necessity of something more than that; *viz.* the spiritual cleansing and renovation; or as it is worded, *Tit. iii. 5. The washing of regeneration, and the renewal of the Holy Ghost.*

PROP. III. A *disposition* to obey divine orders, wherever they are discern'd, either positive, or moral, is part of that *holiness*, *without which no man shall see the Lord.*

I MAY be saved without a sacrament, but can I be saved without a disposition to obey God's authority wherever I see it? A sacrament is a positive rite, and not to be compared with moral virtue; but is not a disposition to obey God's order, moral virtue, and christian grace? Or, can there be any moral virtue, or christian grace, without a disposition to obey the authority of Christ, wherever I discern it? Surely obedience to God's command is a moral excellence.

lence, tho' the instances of that obedience may lie in positive rites. The command to *Abraham* to sacrifice his son, was a positive order, and a very strange one too; seemingly opposite to some moral orders given out before; and yet his disposition to obey, when he was sure of the divine warrant in the case, has set him as the head of all the believing world; as the hero of faith, the father of the faithful, and the friend of God. The command of sprinkling the blood of the passover upon the doorposts of the *Israelites*, was an external positive rite; if there had not been a disposition to obey that order, it would have cost some lives; as it had like to have done to *Moses*, the neglect of circumcising his child, as good a man as he was in other respects.

WAS not the forbidden fruit a positive instance? An external thing? Setting aside the divine prohibition, there was nothing immoral in eating of that, any more than of any other tree; but disobedience is an immorality, let the instance be what it will.

PROP. IV. The sincerity and truth of such a disposition, is best known by its being uniform and universal. *Then shall I not be ashamed when I have respect unto all thy*

*thy commandments*¹. *That we may stand compleat in all the will of God*². The author of our religion has told us, and added his example to his word, --- *that thus it becomes us to fulfil all righteousness*³, and so ordered himself to be baptised; who could have no need of it upon the common accounts, and was already possessed of all its moral significations.

JOHN demurred upon it at first, as an impropriety, for him to baptise Christ: One who had no sin to wash away, in reality, or emblem. Who needed no repentance, nor the outward rite that obliged to it; which was therefore called the baptism *unto repentance*⁴. He was purity it self; able to baptise *John* with the holy ghost. *I have need, says John, to be baptised of thee, and comest thou to me?* thou who hast the fulness of every excellence which any baptism can either signify, or convey: --- *Jesus answering, said unto him, suffer it now, for thus it becomes us to fulfil all righteousness*⁵; q. d. “ I am to own and honour your mission
“ from heaven, by submitting to this ordinance, which belongs to it; and which
“ you have in commission to administer.

¹ Pl. cxix. 6. ² Colos. iv. 10. ³ Mat. iii. ⁴ Mat. iii. 12.
ἐγὼ μὲν βαπτίζω. ⁵ ver. 15.

“ I am near the time of receiving an extraordinary baptism of the holy ghost from heaven, of which you will be a spectator, by and by; and I would give an example to your disciples, and mine, that the heavenly unctions are to be waited for, and received, in the practice of such institutions as are appointed to be their canal. --- Besides, as by circumcision I am already entered into the *jewish* church, I am by baptism to be entered into the gospel church, as soon as there was a baptism that was from heaven.”

THE words were spoken of *baptism*; of the baptism of *John*; and therefore it must needs be *from heaven*; or else, he would never have called submitting to it, a *fulfilling of righteousness*. --- It was a *positive* rite, an external thing, and yet he calls it *righteousness*? Such righteousness, as *became* him who was the holy one of God; became him who had intrinsically no need of any outward ceremony; whose inward purity was perfectly divine: And if it became him to *fulfil* such sort of righteousness, it can hardly become any, who pretend to be his followers, to neglect it. It must needs become us also, to *fulfil* the same

same, and not turn away and say, with an air of disregard --- *it is only a positive appointment.*

THUS it stands in the judgment of him who is the author of your religion; and will be the judge of your behaviour: That the practice of outward rites, if they are from heaven, *is righteousness*, and that it *becomes us to fulfil it*, or thus, according to my title: --- There are *moral obligations to positive appointments*? And the compliance with them is a *fulfilling of righteousness becoming every one.*

PROP. V. As a competent evidence is supposed needful, for any external rite being of divine appointment; so again, a *wilful ignorance* of that evidence, or not discerning it, through criminal causes, will not excuse from guilt.

THE criminal causes of not seeing the evidence for such appointments are, in this case, as in many other cases, *non-inquiry, laziness, prejudice, lust, pride and passion.* That an ignorance owing to these causes, cannot be pleaded, for a neglect of any of God's appointments, is so much the general sense of all casuists, that I shall only add here, that it is at every man's peril how he comes not to know the will of God, as well as not to do it.

How

How far soever simple error may be an excuse, affected ignorance can be none. We must look to it, how we came not to see the evidence of the appointment, and must answer that to God, and our own conscience. It is not enough to say---
 “ Lord, I did not know it was appointed ? ”
 When the answer may justly be : “ You
 “ never enquired into the matter, you never
 “ allowed your self to think of it. Or if
 “ you did, you resolved in your mind, that
 “ you would not be convinced. You made
 “ the most of every cavil, but never
 “ minded the solution to any of your
 “ objections.”

THE evidence is to be shewn, as far as it goes. If a man is not convinced that it preponderates, upon the whole : --- *to his own master he stands and falls.* Who only knows whether it be his mistake, only, or his wickedness.

PROP. VI. The duty and necessity of any external rites, and particularly of sacraments, have their *measures and degrees.* And here I apprehend the measures of the duty and necessity of sacraments to be such as these.

I. THE *authority* injoining.

THE authority of men can make nothing necessary in religion. It is vain to pretend

pretend to it, it is vain to submit to it. *In vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.* But where we see the broad seal of heaven, where there is the divine warrant, *thus saith the Lord*: --- It is worse than trifling, to cavil and say, it is but an external rite.

2. A N O T H E R measure of the duty and necessity of sacraments is the *degree* of evidence of their being so appointed: Where this evidence is not so clear, the obligation is weakened in proportion; but where the terms are plainly binding, and strongly commanding, there the obligation is not to be evaded.

As to the evidence for the duty of the *Lord's supper*, the command of Christ is express, --- *do this in remembrance of me.* *Do this*, there's the command: --- *In remembrance*, therefore it must be done after he was absent and gone. This command the apostle repeats over again, in the same absolute form, and directs it to all the church of *Corinth*; and told them that he had *received it of the Lord, and delivered it unto them*¹. --- Not as a narrative only; of something Christ said, and did; but as an injunction; of something to be done by them after the same manner. --- For ---

¹ 1 *Corinth.* xi. 23.

this only is the sense that comes up to the dignity of the expression; *I have received of the Lord*, --- as he did all his gospel. This is too solemn a stile for a meer piece of history; for which any of the apostles might have been his vouchers. There needed no revelation of such a matter as that; but to repeat the command, to lay down the rules of performance, to reprove for not keeping to the institution, to declare the continuance of the same, even *till he come*, and so to determine the whole transaction to have the nature of an obligation upon us, to *do this in remembrance of him*: All this might not be unworthy of a fresh revelation, and the interposure of the authority of him who gave out the first command, *Do this, &c.*

AGAIN, this only is the sense demanded by the many regulations and directions, with which the apostle accompanies the repetition of this command, *Do this, &c.* and whereby he farther explains and enforces it. If it be said that rules and directions may be given, to do a thing so and so, if you do it at all; without inferring an obligation to do the thing, as duty? --- I answer, this is indeed possible, but cannot be the case here, without making the apostle
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the greatest trifle: To be so large, so particular, so serious, and in earnest; to labour the point, of the right manner of performance, of what after all they need not perform at all! --- I answer further, that these are regulations of the manner of doing a thing actually commanded; the command is first repeated, *Do this*, &c. and then the manner how, is shewn. *Rules* are laid down to direct how to perform the commanded duty; accompany'd with *reproofs*, for not doing it according to the institution; both with regard to the parts of the administration, and to the temper of mind which ought to accompany it. He *blames* them for not eating the *Lord's supper*, but rather doing something else, *this is not to eat the Lord's supper*¹, but where there is no law there is no transgression; and where there is no transgression, no blame. No blame in not doing what we are not obliged to do at all. The ends and purposes of its institution are pointed out, *viz. to shew forth the Lord's death, and remember him*. The *frequency* of doing it is intimated; *as oft as you do this* supposes it must be done often, though, how often, is not specify'd. The *continuance* of the practice is declared to be, to the end of the world², *un-*

¹ ver. 20. ² ver. 26.

til he come ¹. Can that be a temporary ceremony only? The *danger* of doing it in a wrong manner, (*i. e.*) in a manner not according to the institution, or in an unworthy frame of spirit, (*i. e.*) without true devotion, and suitable affections, is laid before them, in those words, *he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh judgment to himself*; namely, such judgments as *sickness, weakness, and death*; or any other, which the offended Lord shall think fit to inflict.

AND to all this, the expressions we meet with, that suppose the stated practice of the Lord's supper among them. Such as these, *Ye cannot partake of the table of the Lord, and the table of devils. The bread that we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? The cup which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? --- And they continued stedfastly in the apostle's doctrine, and in fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers* ².

AND these hints of the evidence of the institution might be concluded, and

¹ Ver. 26. ² Such expressions are not to be accounted for, from any thing, to be observed, in those assemblies, where there is no *bread blessed*, no *cup of blessing*, no *table of the Lord*, no *breaking of bread*.

strengthened, by shewing, that this has been the practice of the church of Christ throughout all ages, and in its more uncorrupted times.

3. ANOTHER measure of the necessity and obligation of positive appointments, is that they are ordered to give way, in the unavoidable competition; when one or the other must be omitted, the preference is given to the moral and spiritual duty. Doing good to our fellow creatures, must be preferred before such rigid observation of the *sabbath*, as would be cruel or hurtful to them. ¹ It is a ruled case, that mercy, and justice, are to take place of sacrifice, ² *I will have mercy and not sacrifice*: And ³ *to do justice and judgment, is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice*.

4. THE necessity of any positive appointment, is also measured, by the *stress* God lays upon it, for the time it is to continue.

THE sprinkling the blood of the pass-over upon the posts of the doors, was not at all necessary in itself, to preservation from the destroying angel; but God laid that stress upon it. The *oracle*, or the *Mercy-Seat*, was a meer positive appointment; God could have met *Moses* any where

¹ Mat. xii. 11. ² Mat. ix. 13. ³ Prov. xxi. 3.

else ; but God laying the stress upon it measures the degree of the necessity of observing that order, ¹ *there will I meet thee, and commune with thee.* --- Moses might have reasoned with himself, --- “ God is every where, “ and can meet me any where, if he pleases, “ and if he does not please, he won’t do it “ here:” --- And so have missed the honour of communion with his Maker ; broke the divine order ; lost the benefit of the oracle, and offended God, by the neglect. And he would have argued like those, who now-a-days are ready to say, --- “ Tho’ “ Christ has promised, that *where two or “ three are met together in my name, there “ will I be in the midst of them, to bless “ them* :--- yet there is no need of meeting together, in his name at all, --- we “ can meet him elsewhere ; or he may “ come home to us.”

5. THE *reasons*, and end, of those positive appointments, make another measure of the necessity of our observing them.

IF there should be any reasons of these injunctions that we don’t know, it is sufficient that they are known to God. Our obedience is always a *reasonable service*, whether we know God’s reasons for the injunction, or no. His command is always

¹ *Exod. xxv. 22.*

reason

reason enough for us. However, a good many of the reasons of his appointing sacramental usages, are known to us, and may be easily discerned to consist, in the obvious uses, and ends, of these institutions. For instance, they are proper *seals* to the covenant between God and man; and so they are necessary as a seal to a contract. All seals are positive appointments. There is no necessity of them (in the nature of things) whatever there may be in point of law, and institution. Men may make covenants, and keep them too, very honestly, without sealing them. They may so, but a wise man will not omit that positive rite, of sealing, meerly because in the nature of things a covenant may be kept without it.

IN the sacramental seals, God deals with us in a way of allusion to our manner of dealing among men; that is, when an agreement is made among men, they proceed to signing and sealing; so here is an agreement or covenant between God and you. You see the evil of sin, and mourn over it; you see the misery of a sinful state, and resolve to get out of it; you see the necessity of Christ to salvation, and flee to him for it. The method of salvation is set before you, and you embrace
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the whole of it: The promises, for your encouragement; the commands, for your direction: --- And the question is put, --- Do you consent, and agree to all this? Answer Yes, I do. --- Then set your seal to it. Such seal as I have appointed for this purpose, among others: --- Answer, no I won't seal; that is but an external rite. The inward consent is the moral part, the valuable part. --- Ay, but to do as you are bid is one part of the agreement you have made. You have agreed to keep God's *commands*; this is one of his commands. You have agreed to walk in his *ways*; this is one of his ways. Under this notion *Abraham* received one of the sacramental rites. ¹ *He received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had, yet being uncircumcised.* --- The thing signified and sealed he had already; namely, *the righteousness of faith.* --- And yet he must have the outward seal, and sign; and his submission to that external rite, or seal, was an instance and evidence of that righteousness.

THIS shews, how meer a nothing it is, to say, that --- " Since I have attained
" moral virtue already, what signifies the
" outward ceremony? " I answer, --- A-

¹ *Rom. iv. 11.*

brabam had faith already, and that faith was imputed to him for righteousness, and yet, he received the seal of that righteousness, which he already had. The having acquired the moral temper did not supersede the use of that positive rite; which was an instance, evidence, and exercise, of the virtue of his mind.

THE sacraments are so far necessary, as the using the *means of edification* is necessary to that end; --- how well they are adapted to our edification, from what we see, and hear, and do, and meditate upon there, is too obvious to be insisted upon here. Every thing is calculated to display God's love, and to exercise our own. To shew how Christ *loved the church, and gave himself for it*, and what we owe in return. To draw out our hearts to him, in faith, and trust, and obedience, and to unite them all one to another in affection and brotherly love.

LET moral virtue be exalted in comparison with externals, but not abused to exclude those rites, that are the means of its own acquisition, and improvement. The excellency of the moral temper is unnaturally employ'd to run down, the very methods whereby that excellent temper,

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is obtained and expressed. Neither of them separate, and alone, are of equal excellence, with both in conjunction. Such means will ever appear to be valuable, in proportion to the excellence of that temper they are adapted to promote; and therefore cannot be unsuitable to the nature of man, nor unworthy of the appointment of God.

PROP. VII. He that commands the outward positive rite, commands the inward disposition, and moral temper at the same time.

HE does not say *Do this*, --- without concerning himself how it is done; whether in a manner suitable to an end appointed, or not. Human laws are satisfy'd if the thing be done, because they can reach only the outward act, and cannot enter the heart. But the divine law, reaches the intention and thoughts of the heart; and commands *them* to go along with, and to be suitable to; every outward act it enjoins. --- This might be shewn through every appointment of religion; but the thing is obvious. --- I shall therefore only add, that, when Christ says, *Do this in remembrance of me*; he commands at the same time, the inward disposition, and every moral quality, that renders a man fit and suitable for so doing.

doing. --- So that to say, --- I am unworthy, and unfit, --- is to own, I am disobedient to the command of Christ; who commands that fitness, and that suitableness, of inward temper and disposition, without which even the outward act would not be an act of obedience to any command of his, --- for there is no such command of his, as enjoins the outward act, without the inward temper and disposition.

PROP. VIII. Positive appointments for such uses and ends as these, are of a quite different nature from arbitrary impositions; with which they are too often confounded.

THE Idea of arbitrary (I think) implies a weakness incompatible to the divine nature; whose perfection it is to do nothing but for some wise reason, and for some good end. Nor can such a blemish ever cleave to the government, any more than to the nature of God, as an arbitrary act: that is, an act of the divine will without a wise reason, and for no good end. An imputation that can never be fastned upon methods so well calculated to our edification and his glory.

PROP. IX. Tho' no positive appointments are absolutely necessary, yet the contempt of them, and of the divine authority discerned

discerned in them, cannot consist with holiness.

THIS contempt may be shewn many ways.

BY contemptuous *language*. Tho' it may be expected, that common civility should preserve ordinarily from that. By a careless and *unconcerned attendance*. The apostle charges the disorders of the *Corinthians* with contempt, ' *Despise ye the church of God, and its ordinances?* From whence alone it can derive, or deserve reverence; by such disorderly behaviour you seem to despise and contemn the congregation of God's people, and the transactions there.

ON the other hand, this contempt may be shewn by a total *neglect*, as well as by a careless attendance. When the omission is from heedlessness of spiritual things, laziness, want of devotion, or other criminal causes. If he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh judgment to himself, does not he that neglects it unworthily, incur the same danger? Is he not more likely to draw upon himself judgment, who unworthily turns his back upon it? As a total neglect, and flight, seems more provoking than any infirmities, that ac-

1 Cor. xi.

company

company our honest endeavours. An honest man doing his best, and acting in the integrity of his heart, may depend upon divine acceptance in Christ; whose blood has virtue to cleanse away the sin of being guilty of the body and blood of Christ, upon repentance. There is no judgment for such to fear, that can be avoided by continual disobedience to the divine order; because that continual neglect and disobedience, does equally expose to the like judgments.¹

THERE is another manner of shewing our contempt of the sacrament, and that is, by *prostituting* it to persons that do condemn it, and to *purposes* contemptible enough, in comparison of the ends of its institution. To persons visibly profane and unworthy, who would never come to a sacrament at all, if it were not for a reason drawn from this world; persons whose life and character is as remote from the design and end of its institution, and all that it means, as swearing, drunkenness, whoring, and all immoralities, are a defiance to its obligation. --- How contemptuous a treatment of the Lord's supper is it,

¹ Numb. xv. 30. *The soul that doth ought presumptuously, the same reproveth the Lord, that soul shall be cut off from among his people.*

to force those to receive it, whom it would be a sin to admit! Can atheists and infidels find out a more effectual way of *treading under foot the Son of God*, than by this treating the blood of the covenant wherewith we are sanctified, as an unholy thing? --- And why should infidels shew more respect to the miracles, or the ordinances, of the christian religion, than its own ministers? The guilt and scandal of this dishonour to God, this hardship upon the honest clergy, and this hazard to the souls of men, lies heavy somewhere --- in proportion to the share that any have in procuring, or continuing, such a profanation; as consecrating holy things with uplifted hands, and with the same hands giving them to dogs. Write up the reverence due to holy things with never so much eloquence, you shew your learning and ability only. It must be the rescue of sacred things from these abuses, that can shew your integrity; and that we do not, equally with infidels, make a jest of our religion, only with a graver face. Religion is sacred in all its parts, its articles of faith, as well as ordinances. True zeal for God, that saves an ordinance from profane communion, will be equally glad to save the articles of faith from

from prevaricating subscriptions, and to deliver both from being any longer the tools of policy, the instruments of ambition, avarice, and worldly designs:

By these propositions, I have endeavoured to state the case of moral and positive parts of our religion, and the measures of the obligation and duty of sacraments. The sum is --- Some things are absolutely necessary to salvation in their own nature. --- No meerly positive external appointment is necessary in this sense --- but a disposition to obey divine orders, wherever they are discerned, is a part of that holiness without which no man shall see the Lord. --- The sincerity and truth of such a disposition is discerned, by its being uniform, and universal. --- As a competent evidence of the divine appointment, is supposed, a willful ignorance of that evidence, or not discerning it through criminal causes will not excuse. --- The necessity and duty of any external rites have their measures and degrees. --- He that commands the outward positive rite, commands the inward disposition and suitable temper, at the same time. --- Positive appointments, thus commanded, and to such ends and purposes as these, are not to be called arbitrary impositions. ---
Tho'

Tho' no positive appointments are absolutely necessary, yet the contempt of them, whose institution is owned, cannot consist with true goodness. --- To conclude, --- External rites are nothing without the inward temper, and virtue of mind; the inward temper is but pretended to in many cases without the external rites, and is acquired, promoted and evidenced by the use of them. *If I give all my goods to the poor, and have not charity, there's the external act, without the inward moral temper, and so it is all nothing.* If on the other hand, I say, I have the inward temper of charity, and give nothing to the poor, but say to my brother, --- *Be thou warmed, be thou cloathed,* --- How dwelleth the love of God in that man? --- Therefore what God hath joined together let no man put asunder. --- Whatever comparative excellence there may be, in the two different instances of obedience, they are both instances of obedience; and the direction of our regard is summed up, in that text, *Mat. xxiii. 23. These ought ye to have done, and not to have left the other undone.*

F I N I S.

